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Abstract: This article examines how authoritarian politics – especially right-wing and far-right agendas – can shape adult education in Austria, and which features of the sector’s governance create resilience or vulnerability. Building on constitutional ambiguity, institutional plurality, and increasingly project-based funding, the analysis focuses on *soft* steering through discourses, symbols, and steering by questions and arguments. Resilience stems from provider diversity, loose coupling in multi-level governance, and the strategic agency of organisations and researchers. Key vulnerabilities include financial dependence, indicator-driven steering, symbolic reframing, and the rapid creation of parallel institutions. Using the Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF) as an illustrative case, the article shows how integration provision can be instrumentalised via mandatory courses, centralised tendering, and standardised teaching materials. The conclusion outlines policy options to safeguard democratic adult education and, finally, also discusses the role of adult education scholars in these processes.

Keywords: adult education; governance; authoritarianism; integration; Austria

1 Introduction

Existing research has examined how far-right governments, parties, and policy agendas shape multiple sectors of formal education – most prominently through curricular *culture war* interventions, nationalism, nativism, and an emphasis on discipline and *native* values – while showing more ambiguous and context-dependent positions on redistributive issues such as tracking, expansion, and privatization (Giudici et al., 2025). For Austria specifically, policy-analytic work on welfare-state change and right-wing populist governance demonstrates how education-related interventions – particularly in youth transitions from school to work – intersect with activation, conditionality, and exclusionary politics, producing tangible consequences for vocational training and youth support systems (Knecht, 2024). Yet despite this growing evidence across schooling, vocational pathways, and youth-related education policy fields, these accounts remain largely silent on adult education. We therefore offer a first step toward addressing this gap by exploring how adult education is affected under far-right governments and policies, taking Austria as a key reference point.

The argument proceeds in three steps. Because the vulnerability or resilience of adult education to authoritarian politics cannot be assessed in the abstract but only in relation to the specific governance arrangements through which the field is steered, we first reconstruct in some detail the political-legal foundations and governance logic of Austrian adult education (Section 2). This reconstruction is not merely descriptive: the constitutional ambiguity, institutional plurality, and increasingly project-based funding it identifies are precisely the structural features that later prove to be either protective resources or points of entry for authoritarian influence. On this basis, Section 3 introduces the analytical lens of *soft steering*, which allows us to grasp how political influence operates not only through hierarchical command but through discourses, symbols, and the framing of questions and arguments. Sections 4 to 6 then return explicitly to authoritarian politics, analyzing the resilience factors and vulnerabilities of the field, illustrating them through the case of the Austrian Integration Fund, and examining the resistance strategies – including those enacted by adult education scholars themselves – through which democratic adult education is defended. In short, the detailed account of governance that follows is the necessary groundwork for understanding where, and by what mechanisms, authoritarian politics gains or fails to gain purchase on the field.

2 Austria's Political-Legal Foundations and the Governance of Adult Education

2.1 Federalism and Social Partnership: Austria's Political-Legal Foundations

Austria is a federal parliamentary republic comprising nine federal states. The federal constitution divides competencies between the federal government and the states, with education as a shared responsibility. The federal level holds primary legislative authority in most areas, while states possess significant administrative implementation powers and some legislative capabilities in specific domains. A distinctive feature is Austria's constitutional requirement for states to participate in federal legislation affecting their competencies through the Federal Council. Additionally, social partnership – the institutionalized cooperation between employers' associations, trade unions, and government – plays a crucial role in policy-making, particularly in economic and social affairs, including vocational education and training. This multi-level governance structure, combined with proportional representation and coalition governments at both federal and state levels, creates a complex political landscape where policy implementation often requires negotiation across multiple actors and jurisdictions.

2.2 The Constitutional Ambiguity of Adult Education

The governance of adult education occupies a distinctive position within educational systems across Europe and beyond. Unlike compulsory schooling or higher education, which are typically underpinned by clearly defined constitutional mandates, robust legislative frameworks, and sustained public funding, adult education has historically developed in a space characterized by institutional plurality, fragmented responsibility,

and what governance scholars term *limited statehood* (Risse, 2011). This article draws on an analysis of governance and coordination of action in Austrian adult education to examine a question of growing urgency: what structural features of this governance landscape generate resilience against authoritarian political interference, and where do vulnerabilities to political instrumentalization – particularly by right-wing and far-right movements – lie?

Austria serves as an instructive case, not because its situation is unique, but because it exemplifies with particular clarity governance characteristics common to adult education systems in many liberal democracies: constitutional ambiguity, dependence on shifting political coalitions, a diverse provider landscape rooted in civil society traditions, and increasing integration into state-regulated quality and accountability regimes. The analytical framework employed here – integrating neo-institutionalist organizational theory, governance studies, and the concept of soft steering – is designed for transferability to comparable contexts.

A defining feature of adult education in Austria – with significant parallels elsewhere – is its uncertain legal status. As Berka and Winkler (2010) observe, there is no independent constitutional competence for adult or continuing education within the Austrian federal framework. The closest approximation is the competence heading of *Volksbildungswesen* (popular education), a relic of early twentieth-century constitutional history that provides no viable basis for purposeful legislation or administration. The consequence is striking: an explicit statutory mandate for adult education cannot be demonstrated, placing this sector in fundamental contrast to schooling and higher education.

This constitutional lacuna shapes the entire governance logic of the field. Where no clear statutory mandate exists, adult education becomes structurally dependent on the political will – and ideological orientation – of the government of the day. What is not legally secured can be redirected, defunded, or symbolically reframed without parliamentary deliberation. Yet this precariousness is ambivalent: the absence of tight statutory regulation also affords adult education actors greater scope for independent operation and may facilitate resistance when political circumstances demand it.

The organizational field was characterized early on by what Pöggeler (1974) described as a strong diversity of institutional forms that resist arrangement in a clear organizational schema. A larger number of providers engage in adult education than in any other educational sector, and the free initiative of citizens and associations plays a more prominent role than elsewhere in the education system (*ibid.*). Drawing on the concept of spaces of limited statehood (Risse, 2011), it becomes evident that such spaces are neither ungovernable nor ungoverned, exhibiting diverse and shifting steering arrangements that resist simple categorization along the axis of state control versus market freedom.

2.3 Between Corporatist Tradition and Neoliberal Transformation

Since the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, Austrian society has experienced profound transformation. The collapse of state socialism removed the systemic alternative that had constrained capitalism throughout the post-war period, enabling what Harvey

(2007) calls the "neoliberal turn" to accelerate. Austria's EU accession in 1995 marked a significant milestone, though whether membership amplified neoliberal tendencies or served as a moderating influence remains ambiguous. This transformation has fundamentally altered the terrain on which adult education operates, creating new vulnerabilities while eroding traditional sources of resistance.

Austria's adult education system is historically shaped by corporatist traditions, strong social partnership structures, and a complex interplay between state, civil society, and market actors. Understanding contemporary challenges requires establishing this institutional context while recognizing that it undergoes profound transformation through neoliberalization, authoritarian populism, and the reconfiguration of education through migration and integration policies.

Despite venerable institutions such as the Volkshochschulen, which are well over 100 years old, the Austrian education system still maintains a clear emphasis on initial general and vocational education. Even strong traditions of qualification within active labor market policy, or comparatively recent offerings such as part-time degree programs at universities of applied sciences, have not brought significant change in this regard. The field of adult and continuing education is characterized only to a limited extent by institutional funding, being shaped instead by project-based funding, individual subsidies, targeted contract awards within labor market policy, and private contributions (Gruber & Lenz, 2023). The concept of lifelong learning is only partially reflected in political responsibilities and balanced funding streams (Bundesministerium für Unterricht, Kunst und Kultur [BMUKK] et al., 2011).

2.4 The Trajectory of Integration: From *Liberal* to *Integrated* Adult Education

The Austrian historian and longtime General Secretary of the Association of Austrian Adult Education Centers, Wilhelm Filla (2013), describes a fundamental shift: until the 1970s, adult education could develop free from state influence and regulation in its content, methods, and access for participants and staff, understanding itself as *free* or *liberal* adult education. Since then, development can be characterized as a process of increasing state steering and integration into the education system. Filla regards the metaphor of *integration* as more apt than the image of adult education as an additional *pillar* of the education system, noting that pillars are static and that the societal standing of *integrated* adult education is certainly higher than that of the *free* variety (ibid.).

This trajectory manifests in concrete governance instruments: performance agreements between the federal ministry and providers, quality assurance frameworks at provider level, incorporation into the Austrian Lifelong Learning Strategy, and the delegation of state-valid examinations – such as the *Berufsunreifeprüfung* (vocational university entrance qualification) and the adult-oriented compulsory school leaving certificate – to adult education institutions. The ambivalence of this integration forms a central motif of the present analysis: greater integration brings enhanced recognition and more stable funding while simultaneously increasing dependence on political actors who control the system's levers.

3 The Analytical Framework: Soft Steering

A terminological clarification is in order. Throughout this article, governance denotes the encompassing set of institutionalized modes through which collective action in adult education is coordinated – the sense in which Risse (2011) speaks of governance in areas of limited statehood and in which multi-level governance models (Schrader, 2008; 2019) are framed. Soft steering, by contrast, designates a specific mode within this broader landscape: the intentional, non-hierarchical exercise of influence through discursive practices, symbols, and the framing of questions and arguments (Göhler et al., 2010). Following the established lineage of steering theory in governance research (Mayntz & Scharpf, 1995), the term captures actor-driven influence that operates without recourse to hierarchical command. This distinction is analytically consequential: precisely because adult education unfolds in a space of limited statehood, where no clear statutory mandate authorizes hierarchical regulation, both democratic and authoritarian coordination must proceed largely through soft steering rather than direct command.

Despite the integration into state-regulated frameworks described above, broad areas of adult education provision – particularly cultural and political adult education – continue to align more closely with the paradigm of liberal adult education, and corporate training likewise remains outside direct state control at various levels. However, these sectors are not untouched by state interventions, even if such influence is exercised indirectly – and it is precisely this indirect influence that the concept of soft steering is designed to capture.

The governance literature distinguishes between hierarchical coordination and various forms of non-hierarchical (Göhler et al., 2010). The latter encompasses forms driven by instrumental rationality – self-regulation, negotiation, competition – and those grounded in communicative rationality, understood as collective work upon institutionalized systems of ideas and value beliefs. Göhler et al. (2010) highlight three mechanisms: steering through discursive practices (categorizations, knowledge orders, positions of legitimate speakers), steering through symbols (cognitive and affective appeals to shared values and worldviews), and steering through questions and arguments.

The last mechanism deserves particular attention. It is defined as a process in which the steering actor, through deploying specific instruments (questions and arguments), triggers a mechanism (justification) expected to alter the addressee's field of action – thereby also changing something in the actor-addressee relationship (Göhler et al., 2010). The etymological connection to responsibility is suggestive: the Latin *respondere* originates in Roman legal discourse and carries connotations of defending, justifying, and legitimating one's actions. Where mutual recognition and commonly shared assumptions can be identified, soft steering through questions and arguments can develop high binding force (De La Rosa & Gädeke, 2009).

This communicative steering presupposes what Koch (2009) terms argumentative elaborateness, substantive consistency, and logical coherence – demanding prerequi-

sites that are both a source of resilience against and a point of friction with authoritarian political styles.

4 Resilience and Vulnerability in Adult Education Governance

4.1 Resilience: What Makes the Field Resistant

Several structural features of adult education governance can be identified as resilience factors against right-wing political pressure.

First, institutional plurality itself provides protection. The diversity of providers, funding streams, ideological traditions, and organizational forms means that a single political intervention is unlikely to capture the entire field simultaneously. Unlike a centralized school system governed by a unified curriculum authority, adult education's distributed architecture creates institutional redundancy: the weakening or co-optation of one segment does not necessarily compromise the whole. Where a single Adult Learning Center may be vulnerable to municipal-level political pressure, a church-affiliated provider, trade union educational institute, or private non-profit may retain greater autonomy, and vice versa.

Second, the communicative prerequisites of soft steering provide resilience. Steering through questions and arguments demands a discursive register inherently at odds with the simplifying, polarizing communication strategies of authoritarian populism. Where coordination depends on consensus and governance legitimacy rests on argumentative quality rather than hierarchical command, the discursive shortcuts of far-right politics – scapegoating, identitarian narratives, anti-intellectualism – encounter structural resistance.

Third, the active agency of field actors provides resistance capacity. Drawing on Oliver's (1991) typology of organizational responses to institutional expectations – ranging from acquiescence through compromise, avoidance, and defiance to manipulation – it becomes clear that actors within an organizational field do not passively absorb institutional pressures but engage with them actively (Herbrechter & Schemmann, 2019). This agency implies that adult education organizations possess response repertoires including the capacity to resist, reinterpret, or circumvent politically motivated governance impulses.

Importantly, such agency is not confined to provider organizations: scholars too can become consequential field actors within soft steering dynamics. In practice, this occurs when researchers develop and legitimize indicator sets, benchmarks, or evaluation designs that structure what counts as *quality* or *impact*; act as expert advisors in ministerial task forces, strategy processes, or consultative bodies; or produce influential problem diagnoses and conceptual framings (such as *skills gaps*, *target groups*, *evidence-based policy*) that travel across policy and practice, thereby reshaping organizational opportunity structures. Simultaneously, scholars may align with and support adult education practice in resisting political influence – by co-producing counter-expertise,

publicly contesting restrictive framings, or safeguarding professional autonomy through critical evaluation and advocacy. Illustrative examples of such alliances are provided below.

4.2 Vulnerability: Where the Entry Points Lie

Against these resilience factors, significant vulnerabilities must be acknowledged.

The most evident mechanism of steering in adult education – regardless of ideological orientation – operates through funding volumes and the specification of funding conditions. In the terms introduced above, this is a hard, resource-based instrument rather than a form of soft steering: it works not through discursive framing but through the direct, conditional allocation of means, withholding support from providers that do not comply with prescribed standards.

Since adult education largely falls outside statutory obligations and mandatory service provisions, it remains particularly vulnerable to budgetary interventions. These educational services, classified as discretionary expenditures rather than mandatory governmental duties, can be reduced or eliminated with relative ease compared to legally mandated programs. This structural characteristic renders the sector especially susceptible to political influence through financial instruments: funding criteria can be redesigned, budget allocations reduced, or entire program lines terminated without encountering the legal barriers protecting compulsory education or other constitutionally guaranteed services. The absence of legal entitlement to adult education services thus transforms budgetary decisions into powerful tools of political control, enabling governments to reshape the educational landscape through fiscal rather than legislative means.

The shift from *free* or liberal adult education – or at least growing portions thereof – to one characterized by performance agreements and program financing has created structural leverage for political influence. Whoever defines funding conditions indirectly defines content. Across Europe, right-wing governments have used funding instruments to redirect adult education toward narrow employability agendas, channel resources toward enterprises, defund civic education, and impose ideological conditions on provision. The phenomenon of *teaching to the indicator* exacerbates this risk. As Munro (2011) argues, targets and performance indicators can become practice-guiding to an unintended degree, and Verbeeten and Speklé (2015, p. 959) warn that "strong emphasis on targets and incentives may result in dysfunctional behavior when goals are ambiguous and difficult to measure." For liberal adult education, whose goals – democratic citizenship, social cohesion, critical thinking – are frequently complex, long-term, and resistant to quantification, this susceptibility represents serious vulnerability. Right-wing movements need not censor curricula directly; they can achieve similar effects by restructuring funding criteria and privileging measurable labor market outcomes over democratic and emancipatory objectives.

A second vulnerability lies in symbolic steering. Göhler et al. (2010) emphasize that symbolic steering operates on cognitive and affective registers, presenting shared values and appealing to emotional self-understandings – precisely the terrain on which

far-right politics excels. The reframing of adult education from an emancipatory project to a purely economic instrument, the ethnicization of educational questions, and the nationalist appropriation of *Volksbildung* traditions operate within symbolic steering without requiring direct organizational intervention.

A third vulnerability arises from multi-level governance itself. The model developed by Schrader (2008, 2019) depicts nested layers from supranational policy through national frameworks, the organizational environment, organizations, and teaching-learning processes; relationships between these levels are characterized as indifferent or underdetermined. While loose coupling provides buffers against top-down capture, it simultaneously enables politically motivated actors to create facts on the ground at sub-national levels with limited visibility or accountability. The fragmentation protecting against macro-level capture can paradoxically reduce the transparency protecting against meso-level instrumentalization.

A fourth vulnerability emerges from the field's lack of primarily normative or professional regulation, allowing new institutions to rapidly take over educational services or existing institutions to be instrumentalized. A current Austrian example relates to the discursive transformation particularly associated with right-wing populist movements. The integration policy arena has become a key battlefield for right-wing influence in adult education. Not only right-wing movements but also center-right parties have used integration discourse to advance authoritarian agendas while appearing to defend liberal values, constructing integration as a security issue rather than an educational process.

4.3 Illustrative Case: The Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF) as a Convergence of Vulnerabilities

While the ÖIF case most directly illustrates the fourth vulnerability – the rapid creation of parallel institutions and the instrumentalization of existing providers in the absence of normative or professional regulation – its analytical value lies precisely in demonstrating how the four vulnerabilities reinforce one another in practice. Financial dependence, indicator-driven steering, symbolic reframing, and weak regulatory protection do not operate in isolation but converge within a single institutional configuration.

The Austrian Integration Fund (*Österreichischer Integrationsfonds* – ÖIF) has emerged as a central actor in this transformation, wielding significant financial and regulatory power. Established in 1960 as the *United Nations Refugee Fund*, it evolved from a housing assistance organization into a comprehensive integration apparatus. Its transformation accelerated after 2017 with the Integration Act, which established mandatory measures including German language courses and *values and orientation courses*. The ÖIF's expansion embodies a fundamental shift in how integration is operationalized through adult learning provisions, both voluntary and mandatory.

The case exemplifies the fourth vulnerability most directly. The ÖIF's institutional position – formally independent but closely aligned with government policy – exemplifies new forms of indirect political control. With integration centers in all provincial capitals and coordination of German courses across Austria since 2021, the ÖIF has

created a parallel system operating alongside but separate from traditional adult education institutions. The absence of binding normative or professional regulation in the field allows such a parallel apparatus to be established rapidly and to supplant established provision. Existing organizations, in turn, must adopt prescribed teaching content and materials to obtain funding from centrally tendered programs. Core didactic paradigms of traditional adult education, such as participant-oriented course design and voluntary participation, are not applied there.

Yet this regulatory entry point is inseparable from the third vulnerability, the dynamics of multi-level governance. The creation of integration centers across all provincial capitals illustrates how politically motivated actors can establish facts on the ground at the sub-national level, building a nationwide infrastructure with limited visibility or accountability within the loosely coupled governance architecture described above.

The configuration is reinforced, in turn, by the second vulnerability, symbolic steering. Right-wing influence operates through educational materials that appear politically neutral while advancing ideological agendas – presenting one-dimensional versions of Austrian history while essentializing cultural differences. Operating on the cognitive and affective registers identified by Göhler et al. (2010), such materials re-frame integration as cultural conformity rather than emancipatory learning, without requiring any direct organizational intervention. The ÖIF's training programs correspondingly emphasize technical language teaching while marginalizing critical pedagogical approaches.

Finally, the first vulnerability, financial dependence, binds the configuration together and renders it durable. The economic dependencies on commissioned training programs, course placements, and success rates for adult education providers acting as service contractors based on externally imposed standards – together with the accompanying precarious employment conditions of integration course instructors – create dependencies that discourage critical questioning. The susceptibility produced by *teaching to the indicator*, discussed above, here acquires concrete institutional form: providers oriented toward measurable throughput and externally defined success criteria possess little structural latitude to contest the pedagogical model imposed upon them.

Taken together, the ÖIF case shows that the four vulnerabilities are not discrete alternatives but mutually constitutive dimensions of a single mechanism of political instrumentalization. It is this convergence – rather than any single entry point – that makes the configuration so consequential, and it is the same convergence to which the concluding section returns.

4.4 Structural Conditions of Vulnerability

The susceptibility of Austrian adult education to authoritarian influence extends beyond far-right strategies to structural conditions creating opportunities for such influence. The financial dependence of integration course providers – often relying entirely on ÖIF contracts – enables rapid policy implementation without institutional resistance. The fragmentation of provision across multiple sectors, funders, and regulatory

frameworks, while historically ensuring pluralism, becomes vulnerability when facing systematic pressure. The lack of unified advocacy structures enables divide-and-conquer tactics.

New Public Management reforms since the 1990s have transformed adult education institutions into quasi-market actors competing for resources. Despite these market pressures, successful collaborative networks have emerged at multiple governance levels. At the federal level, the Conference of Austrian Adult Education Institutions (KEBÖ), established in 1972 as the field's most venerable platform, serves as a key coordinating body, while regional initiatives continue to develop – notably the recently established *Educational Hub Carinthia* (Gfrerer & Schlögl, 2026), a collaboration platform linking adult education providers and universities in the federal state of Carinthia. This platform facilitates infrastructure sharing, joint staff development, and co-creation of innovative educational programs. Nevertheless, marketization generally undermines solidarity between institutions while creating pressures for conformity. Performance indicators marginalize harder-to-measure goals; institutions become skilled at producing metrics rather than education. The projectification of funding creates temporal instability undermining long-term planning, while professional precarization – prevalent part-time, temporary, and freelance contracts – means educators lack job security and collective bargaining power. Precarious workers cannot afford to challenge problematic curricula or organize collective resistance.

The retirement of educators trained and socialized in the democratic traditions of the 1970s and 1980s removes institutional memory and embodied knowledge of democratic practice, while younger educators may lack exposure to critical pedagogical traditions. Institutional isomorphism reduces diversity as funding requirements and regulatory frameworks push institutions toward common forms, while the institutions themselves retain ever less capacity for development, both in terms of time and professional expertise. The organizational diversity that characterized Austrian adult education for a long time gradually erodes under pressures for efficiency and accountability. The weak articulation between adult education and other educational sectors creates isolation, while the decline of traditional civil society organizations – trade unions, churches, cultural associations – leaves adult education more exposed to direct political pressure.

5 Responsibility as Pragmatic Coordination of Action

This underscores that adult education institutions are not primarily *objects* of political governance but rather actors within a complex field who bear responsibility for how that field develops. Hart's (1968) typology distinguishes between causal responsibility, role responsibility, capacity responsibility, and liability responsibility. Applied to adult education governance, this clarifies that responsibility constitutes a shared, albeit differentiated, undertaking among all field actors.

Within neo-institutionalist theory, this collective engagement is conceptualized as *institutional work* – the purposive activities of creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Institutions, as Altrichter (2015) emphasizes, function simultaneously as the presupposed context of action and as the object of actors' shaping efforts – because they store essential offers for coordinating action. The value beliefs embedded in these institutions are not fixed deposits but ongoing accomplishments of collective institutional work.

In this domain, confrontation with authoritarian politics becomes most consequential. Right-wing movements seek to transform the normative infrastructure of fields – to redefine legitimate knowledge, legitimate participants, and education's purposes. The governance architecture of adult education, with its dependence on communicatively sustained value beliefs, means that such normative contestation is an internal challenge to the field's mode of self-governance.

6 Resistance Strategies and Democratic Resilience

Despite significant challenges, Austrian adult education demonstrates remarkable resilience through multiple forms of resistance. Given the previously discussed example of the ÖIF and its role in integration course provision, it is particularly relevant to examine resistance strategies within the specific context of migration and adult education. Migrant self-organizations have effectively challenged paternalistic integration policies, while professional associations – notably the Austrian Society for Political Education (ÖGPB) – have developed sophisticated critiques of authoritarian tendencies while defending principles of participant orientation.

Critical migration pedagogy, as conceptualized by Heinemann and Ortner (2018) and Sprung (2012), offers a particularly important counter-narrative to the instrumentalization of adult education in migration contexts. It reframes migrants as subjects and producers of knowledge rather than objects of intervention, prioritizing critical consciousness over assimilationist imperatives. Educators working within and beyond official integration programs often engage in what might be termed pedagogical resistance: they repurpose prescribed materials as prompts for critical dialogue, create informal spaces enabling participant agency, and cultivate solidarity across cultural boundaries. Legal strategies drawing on international human-rights frameworks have had some success in challenging restrictive policies, while cross-sector coalition-building can generate broader movements capable of sustained opposition.

Alternative educational spaces – including autonomous social centers and community education initiatives – preserve traditions of popular education while sustaining radical pedagogical experimentation. Academic research plays a vital role in making visible those dynamics that dominant actors often seek to normalize or obscure, while the preservation of institutional memory through structured mentorship and systematic documentation helps safeguard democratic educational traditions against generational discontinuity. The development of alternative assessment frameworks – such

as participatory methodologies, portfolio-based evaluation, and narrative forms of assessment – directly challenges the hegemony of standardized metrics as the primary arbiter of educational quality and *success*, offering practicable alternatives to narrow, institutionally imposed competency regimes.

This opens a bridge to the role of adult education research more broadly: much like critical scholarship intervening in migration discourses by questioning deficit framings, exposing governing rationalities, and amplifying marginalized perspectives, research in adult education can function as democratic counter-infrastructure. By documenting tensions, legitimizing practitioners' professional judgment, and providing concepts and evidence for public debate, it can carry – and at times actively catalyze – resistant tendencies within the field, helping defend values-based, learner-centered practice against managerial and technocratic reductions.

Memory culture exemplifies how adult education functions as democratic resistance. It is sustained not only through schools, museums, and official commemorations but also through a dense ecology of adult-education practices. Adult learning initiatives in *Erinnerungsarbeit* (educational engagement with the National Socialist past) counter historical revisionism and the long-dominant *victim thesis* by creating public spaces for critical engagement with National Socialism, antisemitism, racism, and local complicities – often in formats accessible beyond formal education (public talks, guided walks, commemorative projects, and community-based research). A particularly illustrative example is the Austria-wide digital platform DERLA (Digital Memorial Landscape), launched in 2023, which documents memorials to victims of Nazi persecution and provides didactic modules designed not only for school use but explicitly to enable broader publics to engage in inquiry-based, place-based learning (Wutti & Danglmaier, 2024). Their Carinthia-focused analysis shows how a persistent *hierarchy of memories* remains materially inscribed in public space – war memorials to *dutiful* soldiers occupy central and prominent locations, while remembrance of persecuted groups has often been peripheral and belated – yet also demonstrates that new memorials since 2010 increasingly contest these spatial orders (Wutti & Danglmaier, 2024). By making dispersed memorial knowledge searchable, mappable, and teachable, DERLA exemplifies how adult education can operate as counter-public infrastructure: it supports critical historical judgment, invites multi-perspectival interpretation of contested sites, and strengthens civic agency by connecting local remembrance work to broader debates on responsibility and democracy (Wutti & Danglmaier, 2024; Gstettner, 2012).

Another example of how research can enact resistance through advocacy comes from scholarship on adult basic education (ABE). In their comparative study of values-based adult learning and education fields in Austria, Scotland, and South Tyrol, Cennamo et al. (2024) intentionally foreground practitioners' voices to show how neoliberal governance – via intensified monitoring, standardized outcomes, curriculum control, and funding logics tied to employability – pressures and delegitimizes critical-emancipatory practice. Importantly, the article does not treat these pressures as neutral *re-forms*; it renders them contestable by documenting their pedagogical and ethical costs (reduced time for dialogic work, demotivation through assessment regimes, and the

reconstruction of learners as measurable human capital). The research functions as advocacy infrastructure for the field: it provides evidence-based language for public and policy debate, affirms ABE as values-driven democratic practice oriented toward social justice, and legitimizes *repertoires of resistance* (workarounds, alliances, and practitioner-led reinterpretations of imposed curricula) as professional judgment rather than non-compliance (Cennamo et al., 2024). This is scholarly resistance because it strengthens practitioners' capacity to "hold the line" on learner-centered, holistic, and emancipatory approaches under hostile conditions – supporting collective agency, visibility, and recognition of ABE beyond narrow upskilling agendas.

7 Implications for Theory and Practice

Filla's (2013, p. 9) call for developing a comprehensive "state theory" for adult education – one transcending the reductive binary opposition between state control and market mechanisms that continues to dominate contemporary financing debates – retains its analytical urgency and political relevance. In the current historical conjuncture, characterized by rising authoritarianism and democratic erosion, this theoretical project must be fundamentally expanded to incorporate a robust democratic-theoretical dimension: specifically, how can adult education be institutionally embedded and legally safeguarded as essential infrastructure for democratic societies – establishing protective mechanisms against authoritarian capture and instrumentalization while simultaneously preserving its constitutive characteristics of pedagogical plurality, institutional diversity, and openness to emergent social needs and movements?

Several directions emerge. Constitutional or legislative safeguarding would reduce dependence on political conjuncture. This remedy is itself ambivalent, however: the statutory anchoring that protects adult education from budgetary arbitrariness would in all likelihood also entail more direct state influence on curricula and standards – reproducing, in a new form, the constitutive tension between the protection of integration and the autonomy of remaining outside the state apparatus. Diversification of financing structures limits any single political actor's leverage. The discursive and argumentative capacities of the field – the *argumentative elaborateness* (Koch, 2009) demanded by soft steering – require conscious cultivation through research, professional development, and inter-organizational exchange. The institutional work of maintaining shared value beliefs must be understood as an ongoing democratic practice of collective self-determination. Dräger's (2017) reminder that in cultural-historical terms, andragogy precedes pedagogy points to the fundamental significance of what is at stake: adult education is the medium through which societies deliberate upon their own development. To protect this deliberative function is a democratic imperative of the first order.

8 Conclusion

This analysis reveals a complex landscape of challenge and resistance, vulnerability and resilience. The intersection of neoliberalization, authoritarian populism, and the dynamics of migration and integration policy has created unprecedented pressures on parts of democratic adult education. The transformation of integration policy represents a crucial site where these forces converge. First, the construction of migrants as a population requiring disciplinary education normalizes authoritarian pedagogies that, once established as legitimate, are readily extended to other groups marked as deficient or deviant – the long-term unemployed subjected to mandatory *activation* programs, welfare recipients required to demonstrate compliance, or young people in precarious circumstances enrolled in coercive training schemes. What is first justified as exceptional treatment for a stigmatized minority thus becomes a generalizable model of governing through education. Second, the coupling of education with surveillance – attendance monitoring, data sharing with immigration or security authorities, and the conditioning of legal status or benefits on educational performance – establishes precedents that erode the foundations of democratic education more broadly: its voluntary character, the confidentiality of the pedagogical relationship, and its orientation toward learners' self-determined development rather than state-defined conformity. The ÖIF's expansion and the mandatory values courses it implements embody a fundamental challenge to principles of participant orientation, voluntary participation, and critical dialogue that have historically characterized Austrian adult education.

Yet the analysis also demonstrates significant capacity for resistance and renewal. The persistence of democratic principles within the sector, the development of critical migration pedagogies, and the organization of migrant communities show that authoritarian transformation is neither complete nor inevitable. The contradictions within integration policy – between inclusion and exclusion, liberal values and authoritarian practices – create spaces for critical intervention. Structurally, fragmentation ensures diversity preventing complete capture, while marketization generates contradictions that can be exploited for democratic purposes.

The struggle over adult education is ultimately a struggle over society itself. The defense of democratic adult education requires solidarity that transcends the divide between the so-called native-born population and migrants, as well as recognition that right-wing ideology constructs an ever-expanding spectrum of *others* – ranging from migrants and refugees to racialized minorities, and from queer and trans people to those holding left-liberal views. It further demands recognition of common interests in opposing both neoliberal exploitation and authoritarian domination, and a commitment to education that enables critical consciousness and collective transformation. The path forward demands abandoning the illusion of educational neutrality in favor of explicit democratic commitment, replacing faith in market mechanisms with recognition of education as a public good, and complementing educational programs with comprehensive approaches that address the economic, political, and cultural dimensions of inclusion.

Dräger's (2017) insight that adult learning historically precedes the transmission of knowledge to subsequent generations underscores the democratic significance of what is at stake. In an era of rising authoritarianism, the governance of adult education is not a technical question of institutional design; it is a political question about the conditions of democratic self-governance itself.

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